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ABSTRACT

A committee of the National Council of Teachers of English collected data on the elementary composition teaching perspectives observed in literature between 1900 and 1950. The committee's report on two categories of their collected data--position statements and state-of-the art reviews--shows that English teachers have trended from emphasizing formalized writing and formal grammar to emphasizing the social needs that written expression fulfills ("maximum essentials") and the applications of grammar principles ("minimum essentials" such as spelling and punctuation). Although teaching theory has been cyclical overall, shifting in degrees of attention to formal writing, grammar, mechanics, and social context, the social needs composition curriculum approach has steadily gained strength throughout the fifty years. This approach couples preparatory oral language experience (also called "prewriting" or "prevision") with an attempt to adapt written work to the needs of a particular audience. Sterling Leonard was one of the early proponents of prewriting and social context, and current theory reflects his work. As a result of this literature review, one committee member notes the time lag between the publication of position statements and the appearance of associated teaching materials; evidently English teachers need to increase their communication with one another to put theory and research into practice quickly. (RL)

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20TH CENTURY PERSPECTIVES on TEACHING WRITTEN COMPOSITION in the ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

A REVIEW OF AUTHORITATIVE OPINION

Shirley M. Haley-James

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This review of professional literature on teaching written composition in grades one through eight pertains to authoritative opinion on the subject which has appeared in education related periodicals and books in the United States during the 20th century. Literature being reviewed includes that specifically on teaching written composition in the elementary school and that on teaching written composition at elementary, as well as secondary, levels.

Four criteria have been used for selecting authorities and works to be included: repeated pbulication, in national educational journals and/or books, of a given author's works; repeated citing of an author's work by others in the field; position and influence of the author in the educational world; and national dissemination of published reports.

The review, which is being undertaken for the Council's Committee on Teaching Written Composition in the Elementary School, is largely, though not entirely completed. The data accumulated appear to be clustering into something like ten to twelve categories. There is wide variance in the volume of literature in each category, and, perhaps more importantly, in some cases a given piece of work spans two, or even several, of the categories. It is possible that when all pertinent data are accumulated and analyzed fewer than the ten to twelve categories will suffice for presenting them.

Two of the categories which at the moment appear distinct, and yet related, are those presently labeled position statements on teaching composition,

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and state of the art or overview papers on teaching composition at the elementary level. Because time constraints do not permit a summary of all accumulated data, today's presentation will be limited to a summary of data in these two categories published from 1900-1950, and brief mention of selected publications which appeared in the same time frames as these position statements and overview papers.

In 1914 English Journal carried the Report of the Committee on the Articulation of the Elementary Course in English with the Course in English in the High School. This was an elementary committee whose concerns included surveying composition instructional practices in grades 1-8 and relating them to the instructional program of the high school. The completed survey led the committee to the following conclusions:

1) in general, more was being called for on paper than was being done in elementary composition
2) when even young children composed, all sorts of skills were being demanded at once, and evaluated
3) even in the elementary school, grammar was being taught for grammar's sake
4) there should have been less formal grammar, more drill in applied grammar, and more oral composition in the elementary school
5) there was not enough writing going on; in its place there was an inappropriate emphasis on classic forms of discourse
6) there was too little drill being required on the essentials of punctuation and spelling

7) materials for/of written expression should be derived from students' subjects of study, not from English classics serving as models from which they were being drawn, and

8) no definite standards of attainment could be assumed at the completion of elementary school work.

This 1914 report was in many respects the forerunner of a report submitted by James Hosic in 1917 for what became known as the secondary schools reorganization committee. Until this time curriculum had been determined by college entrance exams and had been "teaching the discipline" oriented. With the Hosic report curriculum began a swing to the opposite extreme. Emphasis was shifted to an activity curriculum with the activities being justified socially. Immigrant and rural students, and others who were seen as non-college bound, were regarded as also deserving a curriculum which met their needs. English was a social tool. A focus upon the student, rather than the discipline; doing, rather than knowing; and writing, rather than discussing writing, was central to what was often referred to as a "life adjustment curriculum." With reference specifically to the curriculum in grades 7-9 the Committee recommended the following:

1) training in composition should equal attention to that in literature

2) subjects for compositions should be drawn from a pupil's life and experiences

3) oral work should be integrated with written

4) theories of grammar and rhetoric should be taught at the time, and only to the extent, that they are aids to expression, and

5) any exams given should be power tests, not memory tests.

During that same year (1917), Sterling Leonard's English Composition as a Social Problem was published. To summarize as comprehensive a discussion of

the composing process and of teaching composition as is found in this book by Leonard in a few sentences is difficult. In it he addressed the majority of the deficits stated and recommendations included in each of the reports cited above, urging 100% accomplishment of a few things, rather than namby pamby achievement of 75 per cent of many more; composition subjects which come from vital, realized experience; motivated repetition of correct language forms in language activities such as story telling and dramatization; and the like. He also developed many points about and aspects of the composition curriculum not included in these reports. Introducing to children the concept of audience and communication with, even adjustment to, intended an audience, was urged. Pre-writing (what Leonard called "prevision") or oral language discussion which helps the writer to limit the topic and organize thoughts which will be included in the writing, was stressed. Peer feedback processes were explained and encouraged. In the two decades following publication of this book Leonard continued to publish frequently in the field of English langauge arts and his works were studied widely and cited frequently. The pronounced similarity of the conceptual model for composition instruction included in this book and in very recently published works on the topic is noteworthy.

The following year, in 1918, an article by R. L. Lyman titled "Fluency, Accuracy, and General Excellence in English Composition" was published in School Review. In it Lyman articulated three schools of thought of that time regarding competence in composition: the accuracy movement, characterized by a minimal list of language knowledge details to be mastered at each grade level and abundant drill in spelling, grammar, and punctuation rules; the sincerity school, which placed accuracy secondary and subordinated mechanics, as recommended by the 1917 committee on reorganization; and the social motives school exemplified by the thought of Sterling Leonard, in which subject matter is

dependent upon audience and it is believed that fluency and accuracy in expression will come as by products of social situations when there is occasion for correctness and the student is motivated by a desire to be effective.

Shortly after Lyman's 1918 article was published the NCTE sub-committee on composition and rhetoric published its tentative report, "Economy of Time in English." This 1919 sub-committee identified three essential attitudes and skills which all children in all grades should master more and more perfectly as they advance through school. In composition they should achieve and retain the attitude that speaking and writing are means to ends, not ends. They should write in clear, unified sentences, and forecast what they are going to say before writing the first sentence. They should likewise, according to this report, pre-think the general arrangement of the material.

In 1924 Lyman analyzed 7th and 8th grade textbooks to determine the degree to which they incorporated progressive features of language instruction recommended by the 1917 Committee on Reorganization and by authorities such as Leonard. He found that there was still heavy emphasis on grammar, though there had been a shift to teaching it from a more functional point of view. Composing received from 25 to 42% of the attention of the authors of these books, but oral composition was never mentioned, and the texts consistently failed to "carry over" language study experiences to other subjects.

The report of the NCTE Committee on the Place and Function of English in American Life published in 1926 reinforced Lyman's conclusions regarding a lack of work in oral language composing. Replies to 2,615 questionnaires distributed by the Committee indicated an almost total lack of attention to developmental oral language activities in classrooms surveyed. Two other documents also published in 1926 are particularly noteworthy. Hughes Mearns published his now clearly classic book Creative Youth; How a School Environment Set Free the Creative Spirit. Much as was the case with Leonard's 1917 publication,

English Composition as a Social Problem, it is difficult to summarize even the key ideas from this book by Mearns in only a few sentences. He discussed the contribution of fluency to growth in composition, explaining that mass of written material was essential to producing the occassional piece of insightful composing. Achieving a particular form is not of first importance, he said. The idea and the need to compose are of first importance. Therefore, students must write from their own experience in an environment which supports the desire to write. At the proper time, Mearns stated, authorities and particular forms may be brought in, but always after experience has made the authorities and forms understandable.

The second of the two additional documents published in 1926 mentioned above is English Expression; A Study in Curriculum Building by Roy Johnson. It is noteworthy in that, at this point in time Johnson objected to the idea being commonly promoted of building a curriculum on present needs and interests of the students and warned against automatic acceptance of the social efficiency or social utility theme for curriculum, stating that it lacked particularization. It should be mentioned that several years later, however, in 1929, he published work which suggested that he had modified that opinion.

In a January 1927 article in English Journal titled "English Teaching Faces the Future" Sterling Leonard reviewed the literature of the preceeding decade concerning the battle or debate over the advantages of a fluency or an accuracy emphasis in the composition program. He responded to critics of the fluency position by stating that if adequate and appropriate prevision takes place before writing begins a preliminary organization of the content is achieved and this prevents some of the junk that is prodcued when fluency is emphasized, but prevision does not take place. Prevision coupled with an attempt to adapt a piece of work to a particular audience is the basis of the social needs composition curriculum.

In 1930 Roy Johnson published a "state of the art" paper in Elementary English Review in which he called for a planned, spiraling English curriculum in the elementary school, functional and practical composition activities (which suggests the modification of his earlier rejection of the social utility theory), and the use of models of functional types of writing. He urged that there be no grammar instruction before the 6th grade. Two years later Trabue added that work in a composition class must be related to pupils' interests and activities outside the classroom if transfer of skills learned in class is to take place. In The Enrichment of the English Curriculum in 1932 R. L. Lyman suggested that such functional expression can be initiated in functional expression "centers" in which pupils undertake activities and experiences in fascimilies of out of school social situations. The NCTE Curriculum Commission in its 1935 publication, An Experience Curriculum in English, also called for the English classroom to become a microcosm of the world, with the emphasis not on English, but on the student in society. Clearly, this report and numerous others documents to which reference has thus for been made in this paper were strongly influenced by the 1917 Hosic report for the reorganization committee and/or by the Leonard English Composition as a Social Problem publication.

Approximately mid-way through the '78 years which will eventually be spanned by this review of authoritative opinion on teaching elementary school level composition, Harry Greene published a three part bibliography of major works in the 20th century called "Principles of Method in Elementary English Composition." As he summarized his findings, he reported that many authors thought that the social importance of certain language and composition skills should dictate the stress placed on acquiring them. These authorities tended to also agree, however, that mastery of language skills cannot be left to

incidental teaching/learning and that drill on certain elements should follow observed need for these elements in students' work. Finally, they made the point that there still was a lack of and a need for objective means of measuring expressional activities.

In the early 1940's a new area of concern emerged in the literature on teaching written composition in the nation's schools. The Basic Aims Committee and the Planning Commission of the NCTE published "Basic Aims for English Instruction in American Schools" and "Priorities of the English Teacher in Wartime" in 1942. Essentially, each of these reports described language as the basic instrument in the maintenance of the democratic way of life and called for students to learn to counteract the influence of pressure groups by learning the power of words and how to express themselves well when involved in such activities as letter writing, organizing and presenting reports, and expressing their opinions on both personal and public issues. English as a social skill, stated these reports, is not enough. We must teach English as a skill to create understanding in human interactions. In the same year Robert Pooley (who, incidentally, was earlier a student of Sterling Leonard) published his article, "One People, One Language, in which he called as an individual for English language arts teachers to teach students to observe words carefully; to see the importance of communication, which should be seen as including understanding.

Likewise, in the 1944 publication Children Learn to Write edited by Fannie J. Ragland, Dora V. Smith reflected in the introductory pages that the war years had given renewed recognition to the importance of communication on a national and international scale as well as in personal and community relationships. Filling in blanks in other people's sentences, detailed instruction in language forms apart from expression, and unmotivated repetition of correct usages had,

according to Smith, long been tried and found wanting. Communication crisis of the early 1940's only served to emphasize the failure of these particular instructional procedures.

Two years later, in 1946, Smith authored "The English Curriculum in Perspective in the Elementary School," which was published in Elementary English Review. In this state of the art report Smith suggested in a general outline the direction the elementary school curriculum should take according to the new curriculum study of the NCTE. The elementary curriculum should, because of characteristics of its clientele, include care for individual differences, stimulation of creative activities, and mastery of conventions of language which make for clarity in communicating. The four major elements of the new curriculum should be centered on: communication of ideas and attitudes; creating a setting in which language can develop; the total pattern of a child's growth; and inter-relating the various aspects of the pupil's experiences in all of the language arts, and in his or her education and life. The curriculum should be based on the types of communication important to child and adult in social relationships --- it should (and this will sound familiar) be an experience based curriculum. Exactly what skills should be mastered should be specified, and these should be based on pupils' need for and use of them. This approach, according to Smith, would reduce by ½ these skills then listed as appropriately learned in the elementary school and make possible greater focus on those which were retained.

In the same year Mildred Dawson published "Guiding Writing in the Elementary Schools." Basing her recommendations in the work of authorities such as Leonard, Lyman, and Johnson, she urged that extensive discussion preceed writing so that pupils may clarify and organize their ideas before beginning their writing. Fluent writing based on ideas needing to be expressed and on extensive pre-writing discussion will be more accurate, Dawson stated, than writing based on trying painstakingly to be accurate.

In 1947 H. A. Anderson echoed the call for real, normal situations for genuine communication, stating, even, that research showing the study of grammar not helpful to the improvement of writing is based on poor teaching of grammar. Grammar taught as a part of clear writing, Anderson said, does make a difference in the effectiveness of written composition. In early 1948 in her article "Maximum Essentials in English" Mildren Dawson stressed that students must be concerned with what she called maximum essentials, which are their ideas, if "minimum essentials" of correct grammar, usage, and mechanics are to be learned. In an essay published in the same year which was based on a survey of research literature Robert Pooley related correct usage to the demands of a particular communicative situation and stated that in the period 1930-1948 "right-wrong" aspects of usage had been gradually abolished in English textbooks.

Finally, in 1950 Pooley published a state of the art paper titled "Where Are We At?" in English Journal. A summary of his remarks follows: In the 19th century composition meant a formal essay on an academic or abstract subject. With the growth of the public school and the inclusion of students with less than normal skills, grammar and usage study were seen as paramount. Early in the 20th century students were given compositions to write and all errors were marked because it was believed that correcting all errors would make students write well. In the 1940's, there has been a shift. The purpose of speaking and writing is seen as clear and effective communication of ideas. There has been a move from focusing on mechanical accuracy and precise diction to transference of idea into form and style appropriate to the situation. Pooley went on, [some schools, however, still mark all errors and assign composition topics bearing no relationship to students' communicative needs and interests.]

This, then, is a brief summary of authoritative opinion on teaching composition grades 1-8 as this opinion has been expressed in position statements, state of the art papers, and a few selected books and articles published in the 1900-1950 time span. Many articles and books which have been reviewed for the final report could not be included in this preliminary and abbreviated report. Eight to ten additional categories of data, and the data from 1950-1978 on the two categories included in this report, will be presented to the Committee this coming Spring.

With respect to the meaning of data presented in this partial and tentative report today, several points or questions seem to be in order. If I may, I would like to step outside the constraints of formal reporting, and raise some of these points and questions.

Data collected suggest that there is an enormous time lag between wide spread publication of experience-based authoritative opinion and the reflection of such experience-based opinion in teaching materials which are marketed and teaching methods which are used by the majority of teachers. What accounts for this? Experiences which have given rise to such authoritative opinion very often include action research and controlled experimental investigations as well as scholarly study, teaching experience, writing experience, and observation. I do not mean to suggest that the literature reflects uniformity of opinion, or that it should. On certain questions, however, the weight of the evidence clearly favors some teaching practices over others. How does it happen, and it is my observation that it does happen, that many texts and many teachers continue a tradition of such things as assigning composition topics; assigning writing to be done as homework without benefit of prevision, or preparation for

writing; grading every paper a student prepares and marking every possible correction on each paper written; and teaching "grammar" as an isolated subject, and below 7th or 8th grade level? Is it a matter not only of time lag, but also of incomplete dissemination of research findings and authoritative opinion?

Another disclaimer is in order. I also do not mean to suggest that authoritative opinion derives only from published "authorities" or that classroom teachers should not inform academicians and authors of <u>their</u> observations, experiences, and recommendations. In point of fact, this is a line of communication badly needed. Both practical.y and ethically, scholars, writers, university professors, even the National Council as an organization, cannot and should not legislate teaching practices and materials. For one thing, what if they were proven wrong? What <u>is</u> obvious, it seems to me, is that wide-spread serious discussion and good old head-knocking sessions involving classroom teachers, supervisors, researchers, academicians - scholars of all types - should be much more common. For all too many teachers, one language arts course, if that many, and the text book provided for the grade level he or she teachers constitute the sum total of the professional dialogue about teaching written composition in which the teacher engages. In some respects it is naive to say that somehow national, state, and local English Councils, and local schools, must more often initiate such dialogue; that at each of these levels dissemination of reasoned thinking and experience-based opinion must become not scattered, but pervasive; that NCTE must to a much greater degree seek to be a change agent. Countless highly skilled and committed people have already worked at great length to mkae it be this. In perhaps the same way, however, that the literature reflects regeneration of some of the same significant ideas over decades of time and some professionals discover them "anew"

while others reiterate them, conducting this literature search has served to heighthen my own awareness that if we wish to narrow the gap between experience-based and wide-spread authoritative opinion, and classroom teaching practices, our local, state, and national English councils and publications must somehow expand the degree to which they serve as a forum for genuine interchange and for dissemination of authoritative opinion.

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